Evangelical Protestants in the Public Square: Drawbacks and Opportunities

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GASSON HALL, ROOM 100, BOSTON COLLEGE
CHESTNUT HILL, MASSACHUSETTS

ALAN WOLFE:

There's a long historical relationship between Park Street and the Fuller Theological Seminary, which we may hear a word about, and then I'll be back to the microphone to introduce our speaker.

DANIEL HARRELL:

Hi, my name is Daniel Harrell (sp?). Lucy Guernsey had contacted me about saying a little bit about the connection between Park Street Church and Fuller Seminary. I got a chance to meet a couple of former Park Street folks who knew Dr. Harold John Ockenga, of course, who was one of the founders of Fuller Seminary.

I spent the week going around to some of our members who were around during that time, getting a sense from them what it was like to have their pastor in Boston be also president of a seminary out in Pasadena, and I think their general memory was that he traveled a lot. I think he went back and forth like 200 times over the course of the early years of Fuller's founding which, of course, in the late '40s and early '50s was no small feat. And they remarked as well that given his workaholic habits that he was able somehow to keep both things in balance and somehow do both things well.

As we were talking around the staff a little bit about the Ockenga legacy, we thought of three things that were important to us as we think of Park Street Church, but in some sense of Fuller Seminary too. I've had a bit of experience with Fuller, getting to teach out there a couple of years ago, and some of their graduates have made their way to Park Street Church, and some of my friends serve as professors there.

And as we think about Harold Ockenga and the Park Street/Fuller connection, three things came to mind. One was how it seems that Ockenga insisted during this time that he was beginning this neo-Evangelical movement in response to American Fundamentalism, that it was so important that we engage with a culture rather than separate out from it. And thus, he encouraged people in his church, and we still have this legacy today, to be involved for us in the City of Boston, to be involved with the universities and with the things that are in our neighborhood – the financial district and the neighborhoods – not to just preserve or defend, I s0 0 (s041 0 (s041 0 (d) -5 (e) -4 (f) --4 ra)-2 (g) 041 0 (Q q 0) -5 (e) -4 (f) --4 ra)-2 (g) 041 0 0e

interesting phenomenon in recent years, and I'm going to be paying special attention to that this evening, not just because I'm on this campus – but it is certainly one motive – but also because I think the growing relationship is a very important one for matters that we will be talking about this evening.

Many of you know about the much discussed book by Philip Jenkins called The Next Christendom. Philip Jenkins, who's a professor at Penn State. There was an essay version of this in a recent –the October, 2002— issue of the Atlantic Monthly, in which he

task left is to urge individuals to scramble into the lifeboats"—the enclaves of Bible believing Christians who are awaiting the heavenly rescue operation.

Well, my own perspective changed significantly as a graduate student in the wild '60s. I became convinced that Evangelical Christians should be actively involved in political witness, and I engaged in such activities, often with a sense of deep alienation from the Evangelical community. Soon, however, I sensed the call to the Evangelical segment of the academy, a position from which I was able to work for an aggressive, Evangelical involvement in movements of social, political, and economic reform. In my first book that was published in 1973, entitled Political Evangelism, I made a sustained case for a more activist Evangelicalism.

Well, the Evangelical mood has changed dramatically in recent decades as Evangelicals, who had spent a half century thinking of themselves as a marginalized cognitive minority, suddenly emerged as a bold "moral majority"—that's an amazing shif—a "moral majority" in the late 1970s and early 1980s. Nor has this political reawakening been welcomed by the liberal folks who had gotten accustomed to taunting Evangelicals for their escapist mentality. Many of those critics are probably praying passionately right now that Evangelical activists will soon go back to helping individuals board the lifeboats! Well, to be honest, I have sometimes been tempted to pray for that myself. Given the ways in which Evangelicals have been aggressively public in their social witness in the past few decades, there are times when I wish I were in a position to call the whole thing off, urging th

message for the way we live, calling human beings in both individual and collective settings to conform to the Divine standards of righteousness.

American Religion or something like that, and he asked my wife to take photos along the way of just ordinary churches in ordinary towns. And so we'd be going through Nebraska and we'd pull off Highway 80 and we'd go to some little town and we'd take pictures of four or five of the churches in town. And the pattern – it's right across from Michigan to California – the pattern was a rather consistent one, and that is in the center of the town there was a big Presbyterian or Methodist church, certainly a Roman Catholic church in a lot of places, an Episcopal church, sometimes an American Baptist Convention church, and then on the edges of town or on the wrong side of the tracks there was a Pentecostal church, and maybe a church that said, "Holdridge Bible Church, we preach Christ crucified, resurrected, and coming again"— or the Church of the Nazarene.

These were the churches that were on the edges of town, and it was a symbol of their marginalization. Those churches today own the best real estate in town. They are the megachurches. They're flourishing churches. And yet the theology that has shaped those churches is a theology of cultural marginalization, but the people who populate those churches are people who are in significant positions of cultural influence. And there has to be some way in which we rethink some of the issues. And the Moral Majority was an acknowledgement of that, but the problem was it was an acknowledgement without much theological savvy, and some of the leaders of the Moral Majority have recognized that and have washed their hands of a lot of the things that the Moral Majority did.

And a special challenge for Evangelicals is that we tend to fluctuate between two moods – cultural pessimism and cultural imperialism. To put it briefly or put it cryptically, Evangelicals either separate from the culture or they want to take it over. And there's no alternative to that. And so either it's "this world is not my home and I can't feel at home in this world anymore," or it's "Shine, Jesus, Shine, fill this land with the Father's glory," but that middle area of knowing that we're called to do some important stuff, but that we're never going to own the territory until the Lord returns, that we're in an interim period, or what the Mennonites like to call "the time of God's patience." How are we to act in that interim period, where we can neither separate ourselves from the culture nor take it over, but to do something between those two options of cultural pessimism and cultural imperialism?

My own view is that Evangelicals actually have two theologies that are in their collective subconscious. The first theology is the theology of Puritan theocracy. That's a theology that sees America, for example, as a chosen nation. "Oh beautiful, for patriot's dream that sees beyond the years, thine alabaster cities gleam undimmed by human tears. America, America, God shed his grace on thee. And crown thy good with brotherhood from sea to shining sea." That eschatological verse of "America the Beautiful,"

simply creation, the fact that every human being is created in the imago dei, in the image of God, and that we to acknowledge the divine image in the other person.

So I think we need to explore theological resources for developing a working account of the common good, and Biblically there's a lot we can draw on there. I've been going back and forth to China a couple of times this year, and it's very interesting that – I'll say this parenthetically – the Three-Self Church in China, the registered Protestant churches in China, are very fundamentalistic. They bear all of the marks of the kind of fundamentalism that Carl Henry was describing in his 1947 book The Uneasy Conscience of Modern Fundamentalism, except for the additional fact that even if they had been very publicly minded, they would –

– and left at the time of the Revolution or just before the Revolution. You walk into a church of 4,000 people, and as you walk in they're singing, "softly and tenderly, Jesus is calling." They're singing the old

I've been asked a lot about this lately, reporters will call me,

So that if – the verse that we get a lot is the Genesis verse that God spoke to Abraham, and I got a lot of this. "God said to Abraham, I will bless those – I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless those who bless you, and I will curse those who curse you." And then people would say you are cursed – they would say that to me – because you have cursed Israel. And my response is I want to bless Israel, but it seem

Stonewall Jackson quite theologically sophisticated. He was in the Dabney (sp?) tradition of Southern Presbyterianism and had quite a theological rationale for his views. And my own sense was that this was a good thing to do, to respond to Warner Brothers' invitation on that, because it would be helpful in this situation for church groups to go and see the movie, and then to discuss that very phenomenon with a little bit, as you say, critical distance from the present situation. And I think we need to find ways of

Q: You mentioned that George Marsden, and one of the pieces that you spoke of inaudible). The

MOUW: It scares me, because I do worry a lot about the Church as a collective voice. My fear in Matthews, and I know that essay and I know him and he does fascinating stuff, but my fear in all of that is that it's yet another way of trying to re-establish the voice of Protestant elites who really are, themselves, disconnected from their constituencies. And that before mainline Protestants go too far in the direction of trying to reaffirm their role – the glorious days of Reinhold Niebuhr when he had a hotline from Union Seminary to the State Department. Before we try to revive that golden age, I think the leaders of the mainline churches have a lot of work to do to re-establish some kind of rapport with the local church, because I think their own people, often, don't think that they're speaking for them, and I think that's a real danger in